THANKSGIVING
NOVEMBER 20, 2011

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Psalm 147:1-11
Luke 17:11-19

"Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving."
Psalm 167:7 (NRSV)

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a true blue dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

e.e. cummings

In this season of gratitude, open our eyes to the gifts, unmerited, all around us. The gift of this new day, of family and friends and people to love: the gift of this quiet time together. And as we return thanks, startle us again with your truth and your live in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It's the week of Thanksgiving and there is a family Thanksgiving tradition I wish to share this morning. It is about a dish, an accompaniment to roast turkey so delightful that everyone should know about it. It is called Cranberry Apple Ice. You cook cranberries in water, add sugar, grate and shred apples, freeze the concoction, and, after the turkey has been carved and ready to serve, you retrieve it from the freezer, cut it into little squares to serve it between the turkey and mashed potatoes. Now you know. It has been a part of Thanksgiving Dinner all my life and we have passed it on to our children and their children. There is also a story, the mythology of Cranberry Apple Ice. My mother's father's father, my great grandfather was a man of some wealth. He owned profitable coal mines in the Pennsylvania mountains. Unfortunately he had some very bad investment advice, sold the coal mines to buy gold mines in Colorado that turned out to have no gold in them. He lost everything. But before he did, he and his family were wealthy enough to have an English cook, I loved knowing that, and every now and then a dish would appear at our table that my mother said came from his father's English cook. Somehow, I deduced that Cranberry Apple Ice came from her. That's what I told my children every Thanksgiving. In fact, they remember my saying that the recipe came over on the mayflower – children exaggerate, you know. So one time when my

mother was spending Thanksgiving with is they asked about Cranberry Apple Ice and the English Cook. Was that true? Dad tells us this story every year. "Why, no," she said, "that's not true at all." "Where did Cranberry Apple Ice come from?" they asked. "I cut the recipe out of the food section of the New York Times," she said. There went the myth. Cranberry Apple Ice remains, thanks be to God.

Why am I telling you this? Well, for one thing, if you try Cranberry Apple Ice you will be grateful for sure. For another thing, she taught me the very important lesson of gratitude. I suspect I'm not the only one whose mother taught the habit of gratitude before the feeling arrived. I'm not sure that children come with thankful hearts. I didn't. A source of constant irritation in my home was my procrastination when it came to saying "thank you." The occasion was usually a birthday card with a few dollars tucked inside from my grandmother. "Have you called and thanked her yet?" "No, not yet, but I will." It went on for days. "Have you thanked her yet?" "No, but I will. I promise." Finally, I was firmly escorted to the telephone and she stood over me as I called my grandmother, who was a real sweetheart herself, and told her how grateful I was for the five dollar bill. She kept at it, well into adulthood until I finally got it, until the feeling of gratitude caught up with the habit, and for her tenacity, I am deeply grateful.

I love Thanksgiving because it is the institutionalizing of the habit and practice of gratitude. For many people Thanksgiving is the favorite holiday, precisely because our market economy has not yet learned how to exploit it. No Thanksgiving gifts, a few cards, but not many Thanksgiving parties to attend – just a quiet day and a great meal to remind us of simple, but important truths: the goodness of the fertile earth, the delight of good food, the gift of family and friends, and the reality of gratitude.

I love Thanksgiving around here because while Advent and Christmas are still a week away, in our neighborhood the weekend before Thanksgiving is the time for the Christmas lights to come on down Michigan Avenue and the Parade, last night, an extended Disney commercial, with a few bands and floats and a million people come to watch Mickey and Minnie Mouse and, of course, Santa Claus at the end. I have to say that the Parade which began very modestly – Santa, I recall, arrived in the back of a pick-up truck, has been considerably upgraded. What I love best is that our choir, and whoever wants to join them, stand on the front steps of the church singing Christmas Carols while all this is going on around them. I have, in the past, joined them, and I always feel that it is the closest thing in my life to Isaiah – wonderful image of a "voice" crying in the wilderness.

So Christmas comes the week before Thanksgiving and Advent is just around the corner and I love it all.

Thanksgiving and praising God are at the heart of the faith of ancient Israel. Their hymn book, the book of Psalms, is full of exuberant praise and thanksgiving for the creator and the creation:

> "Praise the Lord!" we read together this morning
> "How good it is to say praises to our God
> For he is gracious and a song
> of praise is fitting…
> Sing to the Lord with
> thanksgiving,"

One commentator, Mark Douglas, who teaches at Columbia Seminary, says that according to the Psalter "giving praise is almost the most natural thing human beings can do." Another scholar says that the Psalmist is "so effusive in praise, so over the top in declaration of God's goodness that it sounds like a love letter from someone newly smitten." [Wallace Buhar in Feasting on the Word p.145]

Ancient Israel's unique idea was that the creation, the world around is, created by God is essentially good, and that its obvious abundance, the fertility of the earth, rain, sun, trees and flowers, the amazing creatures, cattle and sheep – all of it is a sign of God's goodness and providence. When you look at the world, the Bible says, you see something of God. Faith in the Bible begins with an awareness of God's good and beautiful creation, and one's place in it, one's part in the ongoing, amazing story of God's constantly unfolding creation. And the human response to all of that is just awe and second gratitude and third praise and thanksgiving.

It is a major theological theme as well. The great Karl Barth said that when you look around and behold all the gifts that have been given you – all you can do is "stammer praise."

Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown – "The distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is "grace." That God is gracious to us no matter how unlovable we may be. God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a gracious God. And if grace is the distinctive word to describe God's attitude toward us, there is also a word to describe the response we are called to make. That word is "gratitude." [The Pseudonym of God]

In fact, Brown said, the last hymn of all, suitable for every occasion: birth, baptism, wedding, ordination, funeral – he planned for it to be sung at his Memorial Service – is the great Thanksgiving hymn, "Now That We All Our God."

It's not only obligation – it is delight, pleasure, satisfaction. C.S. Lewis once famously observed that the emotionally and spiritually heartfelt

people he knew were the grateful ones, the ones always thanking. "Praise," he said, "is almost _____ health made audible." [Reflections on the Psalms]

And Walter Brueggemann "Praise is both duty and delight… all of life is aimed toward God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to abandon ourselves to trust and gratitude to the One whose we are… Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and our worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy." [Israel's Praise p.1]

As I was thinking about it, it occurred to me that I have voiced my praise and thanksgiving, ever since I had a voice, nearly every Sunday of my life –

> "Praise God from whom all blessings flow
> Praise God all creatures here below
> Praise God above ye heavenly hosts
> Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost"

There is a great New Testament story about gratitude, and health and wholeness. I have found it virtually impossible to think about gratitude without the story of Jesus and the ten lepers. Leprosy was the scourge of life in first century Palestine. The word referred to any kind of skin disease, some of which was serious, contagious and fatal. A priest made the diagnosis and the decision that a person with leprosy had to be separated from the community totally; separated ever from family, spouse, children. So they lived, on the margins, totally, usually in small _____ they subsisted on lugging – from a distance, and whatever food their families left for them. The Lepers approached Jesus. From a distance they call out "Jesus, master, have money on us!" "Go see the priest," he tells them and on the way their leprosy, whatever it was, disappeared, so that the priest, when sees them, declares that they are clean, fit and safe for life in the community once again. Clearly it is a momentous occasion. I see them running, full speed, home and embracing their wives, their children, their parents. One of the ten returns to find Jesus, fell at his feet in profound gratitude. Jesus' response is interesting. "Were not ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? None of them, except this one, a foreigner in fact, returned to give thanks to God." To the man himself who did return to express gratitude, he says, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well." The nine are healed. This man, who expressed his gratitude is more than healed. His gratitude has made him whole.

From the givers' point of view, gratitude completes the act of giving. You don't give a gift in order to receive gratitude, but if you don't receive it,

the act feels empty, incomplete. How foolish it feels finally and say – "Did you receive my gift? I hadn't heard, so I wasn't sure it arrived."

When you cultivate and practice the habit of gratitude, the experience of gratitude deepens over the years. The late John Updike wrote a personal memoir, Self Consciousness, in which he remembered his father-in-law exclaiming while driving "What a view!" about a view no one else in the car appreciated or much noticed. Later, older, Updike wrote:

"Like (him) my late father-in-law, am I now in my amazed, insistent appreciation of this planet with its scenery and weather – that pathetic discovery the old make that every day and every season has its beauty… that even a walk to the mail box is a precious experience, that all species of tree and weed have their signature and the sky is a pageant of clouds. "Aging," he wrote, "calls us outdoors after the adult indoors of work… into the lovely supplication we thought we had outgrown as children. We come again to love the plain world, stones and wood, air and water. The act of seeing itself is glorious and of hearing and feeling and tasting." (246)

The years do teach us gratitude, what University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey used to call "the exultation of our own being that surfaces in the thought 'My God, it's good to be alive.'"

Poets remind us to pay attention. It's one of the reasons to read poetry. I discovered this week that Mary Oliver, a favorite of mine, who lives on the tip of Cape Cod, named her cottage "Gratitude." Her poems are about seeing, noticing, awe, wonder and gratitude. In a poem she calls "Praying" -

It doesn't have to be the
blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones: just
pay attention, then
patch a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest, but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence
in which another voice may speak.

[Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver, p.37]

In another poem –

I go out to the dunes and look

and look and look
into the faces of the flowers…
Such gifts, bestowed
can't be rejected.
If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the
house near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.

["The Place I want to Get Back To" Ibed p.35]

Question: can you thank and praise God when things are not well with you, when you are not feeling particularly grateful, when you have lost your job, or lost a loved one, when a long-held hope just shattered, when a dream died? We must be cautious. Nothing is more unkind than insisting that someone be happy who is not happy, to force a smile when your heart is breaking. But gratitude is deeper and, in a real sense, more profound in difficulty and tragedy. It is precisely in the valley of the shadow where words of thanks are drawn out of us. "Yes, even now – thank you, God, thank you for your love, your presence, thank you for you."

I like to remember how it was for the ones who started the tradition of Thanksgiving. 102 of them started out from Plymouth Harbor on September 6, 1620. 65 days later they sighted land. Half of them died during that long, cold New England winter. Every family lost someone: infants died, the elderly died: husbands lost wives, wives lost husbands, parents lost children, children lost parents to hunger, disease and the cold.

One historian says: "By all rights none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from the first winter alive. That it worked out differently was a testament to their gut, resolve and faith." [Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War, Nathanial Philbrick]

Thanks to friendly natives, crops were planted, fertilized and somehow grew and so, at the very edge of disaster, with every heart broken at the loss of a dear one, they set aside a day for thanksgiving.

Mother enhanced and still enhances my Thanksgiving with the gift of Cranberry Apple Ice. More importantly she taught me gratitude. She insisted that we attend Wednesday night, Thanksgiving Eve worship services, over my protestations. They were usually community services, several churches would get together. They were consistently poorly attended, not very well put on, and utterly boring. "Why do we have to go to church?" I asked. "The sermon won't be any good, the combined choir isn't really into it, and there won't be many people there."

“We’re going,” she said, “because of the hymns. They’re the best – the Thanksgiving Hymns – so if we don’t do anything else we’re going to sing, ‘Come Ye Thankful People Come’ and ‘Now That We are Our God.’”

So we did, and I’m grateful.

She sent me her favorite poem once – at Thanksgiving, and I asked the minister to read it at her grave side, which he did.

It’s by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day…
I do fear
Thou’st made the world too beautiful
this year.

Amen.

The earth, our home is God's creation, God's gift. And we aren't doing a very good job of appreciating it, caring for it. For decades, while we should have been paying attention we have persistently polluted, cluttered, used up, and poisoned the earth, water and air. Ever since Ronald Reagan as President defiantly removed the solar panels from the White House roof – the environment has become a political football, a hot-button vision. Instead of attending to pollution and the global warming an overwhelming percentage of scientists know is a fact, we are still listening to a few, a tiny minority, paid by the companies who do the polluting, try to deny the reality of human culpability in climate change. We just had the hottest summer on record: parts of our country are still experiencing the worst drought in history with abundant, larger forest fires. And the issue is not even mentioned in political debates and speeches. For people of faith, it is a theological and moral issue, an issue finally of gratitude – or more accurately, ingratitude for God's gift of creation, designed to sustain us, and those who come after us.

Cranberry Apple Ice

- 1 bag cranberries
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 cups water

Bring all three to a boil until cranberries pop

Pour into food mill with liquid and process

- 4 apples, grated, do not cook

Add apples

Mix and freeze in 3” deep casserole

Cut and Serve